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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000501

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: GOB DECIDES NOT TO PUNISH OPPOSITION SOCIETY

REF: MANAMA 471

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary

1. (SBU) The GOB decided April 5 not to take legal action against leading Shi'a opposition political society Al Wifaq for its role in organizing a March 25 demonstration that was banned by the government. Minister of Social Affairs Dr. Fatima Al Belooshi met with Al Wifaq's leadership and reiterated that they should abide by the law (i.e., no more unauthorized demonstrations), but did not order a temporary closure of the society as some had expected. The latest confrontation between the GOB and the opposition shows that the two sides, while maneuvering for tactical advantage, recognize the value of pulling back from more serious confrontation.

Peaceful demonstration organized without GOB permission

2. (SBU) On March 25 leading Shi'a opposition political society Al Wifaq defied the Ministry of Interior's decision to refuse to permit a demonstration and led several thousand people in a rally calling for constitutional reforms. The GOB did not prevent the demonstration, but subsequently warned that it might take legal action against Al Wifaq, and many predicted that the society would be closed for 45 days. On March 28, an Al Wifaq representative announced that the society removed all of its documents from its premises as a precautionary measure.

GOB decides not to punish Al Wifaq

3. (C) Minister of Social Affairs Dr. Fatima Al Belooshi met with four of Al Wifaq's leaders April 5 to discuss the society's role in organizing the demonstration. According to Embassy contacts, the tone of the meeting was amicable and she told them that no action would be taken against Al Wifaq. She stated, however, that the society should keep a lower profile in the coming months and she reiterated to them that they should abide by the law and respect government decisions.

Parliament condemns illegal demonstration

4. (SBU) On March 28, the Shura Council issued a statement criticizing Al Wifaq for violating the law. On March 29, the Council of Representatives (COR) also issued a statement condemning Al Wifaq. The COR statement was an initiative of seven deputies from the Al Asala (Salafi), Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood), and independent (pro-government) blocs. Numerous Shi'a representatives spoke passionately against the statement, but they were outnumbered by those who supported it.

Shi'a clerics call for moderation

5. (SBU) In his April 1 Friday prayer sermon, leading Shi'a cleric Sheikh Issa Qassem said that both the GOB and the opposition should refrain from actions that would escalate the tension between them. He noted that he did not call for participation in the rally because he wanted to maintain bridges between the government and the people. He added that he did not think the ban on the demonstration was fair and warned that closing Al Wifaq would only deepen the political crisis in the country. Al Wifaq President and prominent cleric Sheikh Ali Salman confirmed in his Friday prayer sermon that the opposition was fully committed to promoting goals that everyone shares including stability, security, and economic prosperity.

Iran -- not Al Wifaq -- may be the GOB's concern

16. (C) NDI representative Fawzi Guleid told PolOff that several MPs met with the Minister of Interior recently to express their concern about the GOB's response to the Al Wifaq rally. The minister replied that, although it may have appeared that the government was trying to restrain Al Wifaq, it was really targeting a small portion of the protesters whose main alliance is with Iran. Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar, in a conversation with the Ambassador, also linked the decision to deny a permit for the demonstration to continuing concerns about Iranian links to Shi'a oppositionists in Bahrain.

Comment

17. (C) We can expect to see more maneuvering between the Shi'a oppositionists and the government in the coming months, and indeed until the parliamentary elections in 2006. The Shi'a oppositionists, prodded by more extreme elements in the ranks, will continue to challenge the government. The government, influenced by traditional concerns about Shi'a activism and political instability, will push back. The conciliatory resolution of this case suggests that, for now, the leadership on both sides recognizes the advantage of pulling back from a more serious confrontation.
MONROE